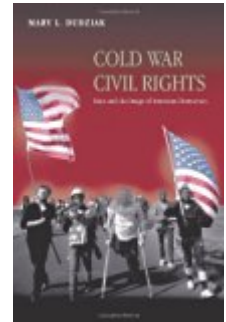


Mary L. Dudziak. *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy (Politics and Society in Twentieth Century America)*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000. xii + 330 pp. \$42.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-01661-0.



Reviewed by David Farber

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Civil Rights and the Cold War

Mary Dudziak's sophisticated account of race, reform, and international relations in post-World War II America is an outstanding work that should help historians rethink the early Cold War era. She joins a short list of scholars who have successfully rewritten the history of the civil rights movement and the history of Cold War international relations by linking each to the other (a list of such historians would include Tim Borstelmann, Gerald Horne, Penny Von Eschen, and Brenda Gayle Plummer).

Dudziak argues that Cold War concerns convinced American government officials, including Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy, to be more supportive of civil rights reforms than they may well have been otherwise. The problem of American race relations, she shows, was central to international perceptions of the United States. The Soviets contributed to the perceptual problem by spotlighting America's sorry record in their international propaganda. U.S. embassy and consular officers, bombarded by such negative international coverage of American racial injustice,

could not ignore the issue. Many did their best to report--in both private and public communications--that the Cold War was being adversely affected by international perceptions of American racial inequality.

For example, Secretary of State Dean Acheson wrote in 1947: "[T]he existence of discrimination against minority groups in this country has an adverse effect upon our relations with other countries. We are reminded over and over by some foreign newspapers and spokesmen, that our treatment of various minorities leaves much to be desired.... We will have better international relations when those reasons for suspicion and resentment have been removed" (p. 80). (Acheson's concerns were quoted in "To Secure These Rights" (1947), the report issued by President Truman's Committee on Civil Rights.) Similarly, Chester Bowles, U.S. Ambassador to India, used a 1952 speech at Yale University to hammer the message home: "A year, or even a week in Asia is enough to convince any perceptive American that the colored peoples of Asia and Africa, who total two-thirds of the world's population, seldom think

about the United States without considering the limitations under which our 13 million Negroes are living" (p. 77). Bowles was a liberal, long concerned about racial injustice, but other State Department officers, with little or no prior interest in race relations found themselves forced to deal with international condemnation of American racial inequality. State department personnel were among the first in the American government to understand that incidents of domestic racial injustice were no longer just local stories—a Southern regional problem—but had become headline news across the globe.

Dudziak has done marvelous research into the various tactics the U.S. government took in managing international perceptions of American race relations. The United States Information Agency did its best to present a progressive story of American race relations to the rest of the world. Using speakers, press releases, and documentary films, the USIA tried to take the edge off Soviet propaganda and negative international coverage of racial injustice in the United States by explaining how democratic processes allowed the American people to resolve their own problems. Less pleasantly, especially early on in the Cold War, government officials hamstrung African Americans like Paul Robeson and W.E.B. Dubois, through intimidation and passport confiscation, from presenting a critical version of American race relations to international audiences.

International focus on American race relations peaked in the early 1960s. The international press made the Freedom Rides, the Birmingham Protest, the March on Washington, and other iconic events headline news in almost every country of the world. President Kennedy, focused as he was on the Cold War, was made well aware of the disastrous affect such headlines had on America's international credibility. In the summer of 1963, for example, Assistant Secretary of State G. Mennen Williams reported that in Africa President Kennedy was well respected but American influ-

ence was "precarious because of the need to realize the promise of the President's civil rights program" (p. 187). Dudziak makes a solid case that such international pressure played an important role in Kennedy's civil rights policy-making, just as it had in President Truman's and, to a lesser extent, President Eisenhower's.

Dudziak concludes that passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act had a major impact on international public opinion. She demonstrates that a major campaign by the USIA contributed to an almost uniformly positive international response to the pathbreaking legislation. American democracy, many around the world believed, had worked. More complicated problems like economic inequality caused by centuries of blatant racism, Dudziak believes, did not resonate around the world, in part, because people understood that capitalism did not promise economic equality (she might have emphasized, too, that widespread American affluence made questions of relative poverty in the United States less transparent to other societies).

In sum, Dudziak has written an important book based on impeccable research. The book is beautifully written and designed. *Cold War Civil Rights* is the second book in Princeton University Press's new series, "Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America," edited by William Chafe, Gary Gerstle, and Linda Gordon. With books such as Dudziak's, this series promises to be a superb addition to twentieth-century American historiography.

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